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ABSTRACT

Trustees at three small, independent colleges were interviewed to determine how trustees could contribute to a college's revitalization. Based on these interviews, several ways in which trustees can help individually and collectively with a college's revitalization were identified. The three colleges were located in different states and regions and in both rural and urban areas. All were church-related and one was a historically Black institution. Seven key essential characteristics of supportive and effective trustees were identified. Successful trustee boards: (1) enjoyed the president's commitment to partnership; (2) had a chair who exercised leadership; (3) governed themselves responsibly by establishing structure and procedures and selecting members to meet the college's diverse needs and ensure their own ongoing development; (4) fulfilled their corporate responsibilities; (5) made high-level psychological and resource commitments including high levels of personal financial contribution and assistance with funds solicitation; (6) maintained multiple, constructive relationships; and (7) stayed informed. During periods of institutional decay, these characteristics were found to be absent but during periods of renewal, they were present. (JLS)

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Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges

A Prescription for Vitality for Small, Private Colleges

By Ruth B. Cowan

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A Prescription for Vitality for Small Colleges

By Ruth B. Cowan

Trustees are important to the success of all institutions. But they are especially crucial to the success of small, independent colleges that are recovering from years of spiraling decline. As a college seeks to revitalize itself, the board can be a valued partner in the process of positive change.

Of course, trustee activity can never replace presidential leadership in an institution's revitalization. Even though trustees have sometimes stepped in to run a college during troubled times, those trustees would be the first to acknowledge they were merely "rowing" until a new president arrived to steer the institution in the right direction.

To find out exactly how trustees can contribute to a college's revitalization, I interviewed 21 trustees at three small, independent colleges. Each of these colleges began a revitalization process at least five years before, after years of serious institutional decline. And at each, the board of trustees and the president worked as partners in that process.

Based on those interviews, this paper identifies several ways trustees can help individually and collectively with a college's revitalization. In doing so, it offers trustees a prescription for their contributions to this process.

The colleges—before and after. The three colleges are located in different states and different regions and in rural and urban areas. All three are church-related, and one is a historically black institution.

To provide a comparison of the boards before and after institutional revitalization began, I interviewed trustees who served during the years of decline as well as during the revitalization process. In addition, I interviewed the presidents, chief administrators, and some faculty members at each college. I also spoke with trustees at another six institutions. All interviewees were promised anonymity for themselves and their institutions. (To maintain that anonymity, this paper uses gender-specific pronouns randomly.)

I selected these colleges based on recommendations from individuals and organizations servicing higher education. I asked those experts to suggest colleges that met my two criteria—a revitalization effort at least five years old, and a reputation of partnership between president and board. The trustees and presidents at the three colleges confirmed that they had indeed worked as partners, though they varied in their estimates of the depth and extent of that partnership.

All were unanimous, however, on the sad state of their colleges before revitalization. Whether gauged by objective measures—such as enrollment, finances, retention, and alumni participation—or by subjective measures of campus morale and community perception, these colleges were down and out.

In all three cases, the revitalization effort hinged on the arrival of a new president. One of those presidents told me that an interim predecessor warned him his job might be to close the college. Another recalled, "Buildings had been closed—they just locked the doors. Then the buildings began to deteriorate at a rapid rate."

One president's description of what she found when she arrived could serve as a metaphor for each of the colleges:

> *The campus looked like nobody lived there. Even the trees were forlorn. The branches seemed wild through lack of care, and there were no flowers anywhere. The president's house was dilapidated. Some of the windows couldn't be raised. Those that could, then couldn't be lowered. My daughter cried, "Do we have to stay?"*

In the last five years, however, all three of the colleges have replaced the evidence of decline with evidence of healthy growth. Enrollment and financial resources have gone up year by year. Curricula have undergone dazzling changes, and teaching and learning have gained real attention. All three colleges now enjoy a clarity of purpose and a sense of community built on openness and mutual respect.

Those interviewed expressed joy, pride, and optimism: "Previously, we had a helpless feeling; how in the world could we do anything? Now, there's nothing that can stop us." "We all have high expectations here." "We dream big dreams, now."

Seven essential qualities. In studying these colleges, I hoped to identify characteristics that distinguish the boards of trustees at turnaround colleges. I found that the three colleges, though dissimilar in mission and other defining traits, were governed by boards of trustees that are strikingly similar. In particular, all the boards displayed these seven qualities:

- they enjoyed the president's commitment to partnership;
- they had a chair who exercised leadership;
- they governed themselves responsibly, by establishing structure and procedures, selecting members to meet the college's diverse needs, and ensuring their own ongoing development;
- they did, as a corporate body, what they were supposed to do;

- they made high-level psychological and resource commitments;
- they maintained multiple, constructive relationships; and
- they stayed informed.

These characteristics were not all equally developed in each case, but they were all evident. And significantly, all had been absent during the days of institutional decay. At each of the colleges, some of the trustees used the same words to compare the present with the past: "It's the difference between day and night."

That difference was the result of purposeful effort. Said one interviewee, "The board realized it had to make a choice—either close the school or do its business. To do its business, the board had to be revitalized." In other words, each college's transformation occurred hand in hand with a transformation of its board. At all three of the colleges, trustees told me, "Our board has been completely remade."

Let's look at those seven key qualities in more detail.

1. Trustees enjoy the president's commitment to partnership. The presidents helped in varying ways to develop the previously inadequate boards, serving in roles ranging from guide and teacher to "the vitalizing agent of the board." But only one particular presidential contribution seems to have been essential: At each college, the president made a commitment to a governance partnership.

Some presidents see the board as a burden and board activity as an interference. Such were the presidents who served when the colleges were in decline. As trustees remembered: "He was one of those presidents who doesn't use the board, who fights the trustees, who thinks the trustees can't give them anything." "Before, the relationship with the president was arm's length." "When I came to board meetings I felt I was being manipulated by the president, and I was."

By contrast, the new presidents wanted to work with their boards. Some sought to establish a partnership at the outset. Said one trustee, "Our president from the very beginning expected the board to be a vital force here."

Said another, "It was clear the president knew she couldn't succeed without a board that was supportive—and by supportive she didn't mean a board that said 'Amen, Amen, Amen.'"

The presidents were not necessarily schooled in developing such a board. One president conceded:

I went to AGB retreats for new presidents to learn how a board of trustees could be useful to an institution. It took me years to learn how to use the board. But I truly appreciated how the board fit into the college governance when [the trustees strongly objected to recommendations on faculty appointments that were inconsistent with the college's commitment to faculty diversity.] The board exercised its moral authority. I felt so proud. I wouldn't have known how to ask it to do that. I moved from thinking of the board as an organization that meets, to thinking of them more as partners, as people you'd call up to discuss ideas and issues with.

All the presidents invest time (in the case of one president, as much as 25 percent of his time) and staff support to build and maintain a partnership with the board. In addition, they respect the need to use the trustees' time well.

2. The board chair exercises leadership. Leadership can come only from the chair, because that person is, as one chair explained, "the only one who can know what's going on across the board." To maintain that knowledge, that chair visits campus "probably three times a week" and attended all board committee meetings.

Before the revitalization effort, each of the boards suffered from a "leadership vacuum." At one college, for example, "the chair understood that his only role was to say 'yes.'" In all three cases, that vacuum had to be filled before a revitalization process could begin.

At one college, the first chair to serve with the new president recalled, "I spent my time trying to get the board functioning and attending to board business." At another college, the chair worked to shift the board from handling crises to focusing on planning—a focus that later chairs maintained.

In the third case, the chair worked to raise the standard of performance of all board members. "It was leadership by example," a senior administrator explained. The chair, however, attributed his success to a more direct approach: "I made it plain, at three or four meetings, that if there were some who didn't wish to contribute, I'd be glad to accept their resignations."

A successful chair focuses on the board itself and is responsible for the board's performance. Recalled one trustee, "The president never said to the board 'Let's be partners.' It was [the chair] who saw to it that the board was a partner, and she did this by developing the board."

In an effective partnership, the chair serves as a special representative of the president, helping the presidents to clarify and win acceptance for the mission, develop consensus, make a case before the board, and, as one president expressed it, "establish my voice."

But an effective board leader doesn't simply echo the president's sentiments unthinkingly. Rather, the chair should work with the president to develop acceptable policies and viable strategies. At one college, the chair tutored the president in strategic thinking. "He did this by the questions he asked: He wouldn't ask 'What are you doing'; he'd ask 'What's your strategy?' We had conversations probably once or twice a month, and he sent me things to read."

The board chairs also communicate diligently to the entire board, not merely to the executive committee or to a select few trustees. "We stay in constant contact—there are constant updates, nothing is hidden," said one chair. Another noted, "I try not to do any more than is necessary with the executive committee. I want to do it with the whole board. I don't want an executive committee that knows what's happening and everyone else who doesn't."

3. The boards govern themselves responsibly. Responsible self-governance is evident in several different areas. In particular, the board establishes a structure and procedures, selects members wisely, and ensures its own ongoing development.

• *Effective structure and procedures.* At some time during the early stages of institutional turnaround, each of the boards established committees and assigned every trustee to at least one committee. A good committee structure ensures each trustee the opportunity to serve meaningfully. Said one trustee, "It is through our committees that the board has become the president's partner, because our committees really work."

Active committees also guarantee that someone on the board is paying attention to each specific area it oversees. At one college, the former president had behaved erratically and irrationally over a three-year period, during which enrollment, finances, and institutional morale suffered seriously. These signs of trouble would not have gone unquestioned, a trustee declared, if there had been an effective board committee system: "Functioning committees enable members to delve deeply. The committees would have seen that something was wrong, and the executive committee would have acted."

Today, at all the colleges, the committees are very active, working with administrators, faculty, and students in their areas of jurisdiction. Meanwhile, the executive committee does not do the work that the whole board should be doing; it coordinates the work of the committees and ensures that they function effectively.

The boards also established procedural ground rules: "A board has to have a foundation, and bylaws provide that."

Formal procedures, along with committee structure, brought about

real change in the boards' ability to function—and in trustees' ability to contribute. "Before, there were no bylaws, no minutes, no functioning committees—nothing," one trustee said. Said another, "When I used to come to meetings, the president, the board chair, and the secretary could do what they wanted to do with the board. Now everyone's participation is valuable, and everyone makes a contribution."

• *Selection of members who reflect the diverse needs of the college.* During the years of institutional decline, presidents dominated trustee selection. The criteria seemed to be friendship, public recognition, or expected passivity. Recalled one trustee, "I was asked to be on the board because they thought I wasn't going to cause any trouble."

Now, instead of presidential selection, each board relies on a hard-working membership committee. As one trustee explained, "This president's got enough self-confidence that she doesn't need cronies. She's not picking the trustees."

The committees consider recommendations from trustees and from others, and then, with full board knowledge and approval, select candidates to actively cultivate. During cultivation, which is usually over an extended period, expectations are made explicit: "A lot of care is lavished on recruiting trustees."

The membership committee bases its selections on specific criteria that reflect the college's needs. The committee works to ensure that new board members will give their trusteeship a high priority and will add to the board's diversity of characteristics, experiences, perspectives, and resources. And it seeks people who embrace the college's mission. At one college, where the mission focuses on racial and ethnic equity, commitment to the mission heads the list: "For someone to be a trustee here, there must be evidence of a commitment to social justice."

Trustees who do not serve on the membership committee understand and respect the importance of new members and the criteria for their selection. Said one, "The membership committee is careful about whom they select, and we are careful about whom we recommend." Added another, "For board turnaround, you need new blood—the right new blood."

Transforming a board means not only gaining new members, but also removing—or changing the expectations of—the existing ones. Some former trustees left by choice or by request; some who stayed welcomed change. Through a conscious effort, the trustees created "a different kind of board."

• *Ongoing development for board members.* Serving on the board is, in itself, a development experience. At two of the colleges, trustees noted that by participating on the collegewide strategic-planning committee that initi-

ated their college's turnaround, they learned "what a small college is and what a rich heritage we almost lost."

But since these boards are characterized by a spirit of self-determination, they are not content with relying exclusively on learning on the job. They all undertake focused trustee development through how-to workshops on such topics as formulating agendas, enhancing trustee effectiveness, and evaluating trustee performance. All the boards schedule retreats—"a powerful means for biting into strategic issues, for learning about trends, and for identifying change initiatives we should be taking." They use outside facilitators and materials. Two of the boards have ongoing trustee and committee self-evaluation processes.

Individual trustees pursue their own development by attending outside meetings given by AGB or state associations. These meetings—generally assessed as "worthwhile" and some even as "inspiring"—protect against the danger of insularity, one trustee explained: "I don't believe our president would not tell us the truth, but she doesn't know everything."

Two of the presidents took board development "very seriously" from the outset. The third did so after the trustees told him they "don't really know how to be a good board," and appealed for his help. The presidents, as board teachers, use outside training materials and workshops, regularly send trustees articles they think worthwhile, and use the issues with which the trustees are dealing as development opportunities.

The boards also recognize that trustees' development must begin as soon as they arrive. At one college, "orientation" once consisted of a walk around the campus with the president; another offered no orientation at all. "Now we have a video presentation about the college and its history," said a trustee. "We use AGB materials and materials we've developed ourselves. Other trustees are part of this orientation."

4. The boards do what boards are supposed to do. The two board functions that are most important, trustees repeatedly stated, are to ensure that the institution has a good president and that it is financially sound. A third responsibility is to plan for the institution's future. Finally, the board contributes to governance by making policy.

• *Selecting and evaluating the president.* "Select a good president—the right president," one trustee advised, "and hold him or her accountable. But first make sure you know what the president is supposed to do."

The right president for an institution in decline, according to the trustees interviewed, is a person of character, integrity, and vision who appreciates what education should be and has credibility with the faculty. The trustees at each of the colleges found a president who measures highly on

these scales—unlike their predecessors—and who was able to lead institutional revitalization.

At each of the colleges, presidential selection occurred at a time of institutional difficulty, even despair. At two of the colleges, the trustees had fired the president; an interim president was functioning at the third. The trustees were running one institution "in a state of terror. We were broke. But we didn't cut any corners financially in the search. We hired a good consultant; we raised the money to do this when it was impossible."

Boards need to beware that a close trustee-president relationship and their common commitment to support the president can lead them to overlook presidential difficulties. The three colleges' boards, having witnessed their former presidents' incompetency, mental deterioration, and active institutional destructiveness, were acutely aware of the need for careful, valid presidential evaluation that would enable them "to sit down with the president before he and the college got into deep trouble." Explained one trustee, "I've seen it in business: a bad CEO can ruin a corporation in a year."

In the days when the colleges were in deep trouble, evaluation consisted of a superficial exchange. "I served on the committee that structured how we review the president's performance. The old way was done by the chair and then whitewashed by the executive committee," said one trustee.

Each of the boards now uses an evaluation process that includes presidential self-evaluation, which "has a much harder edge to it than self-reflection," one president noted. Said another, "They would nail me if there were a discrepancy between what I said and my performance. [The chair] would not hesitate to ask probing questions." At two colleges, the self-evaluation comes through formal committee assessments of the president's accomplishments in that committee's domain.

In each case, the evaluation process is based on explicit expectations related to the college's stated goals. The presidential evaluation, therefore, is simultaneously an institutional evaluation that informs the board whether it is, in a systematic way, reaching the targets set for the college. "There's been a sea change in evaluation—assessment by results in lieu of assessment by relationships."

• *Ensuring the college's financial soundness.* The second of the two functions that trustees repeatedly placed at the top of any board's responsibilities is safeguarding the institution's financial stability. The trustees must ensure that enough money comes into the college and that what comes in is well managed. A board ensures the former by active involvement in fund-raising and investment management; it ensures the latter through diligent committee work, thorough analysis of financial documents, and probing questions.

• *Charting the future.* Right behind presidential selection and financial security, the trustees identified planning for the future as a high priority. Said one, "It is the president's responsibility to help the institution and the board envision the future, but it is the board's responsibility to make sure there's a plan for that vision. Our eyes must be on our future."

At two of the colleges, presidents came with strong experience in planning and immediately initiated a comprehensive transforming process, involving faculty, administrators, staff, students, alumni, and community representatives. At one college, the process engaged at least 200 people. The planning committees, chaired or cochaired by trustees, worked to examine where the college had been, where it then was, and where it should be. The committee reports ultimately went to the board for refinement and adoption. The trustees agreed that the processes, as much as their results, were crucial to their colleges' revitalization.

At the third college, this kind of planning began two or three years after the president came. A new trustee who was an expert in strategic planning helped craft and maintain the process.

The end product at all the colleges was a written plan that served as a continual point of reference and the first phase of ongoing planning. At one college, the initial plan was, as one trustee explained, "a survival plan. We were deep in the hole before. We could only see the sky. Now we're out of the hole; we can see the horizon." The "horizon" they see includes their college as a leader for educational reform throughout the country. "It was not possible for us to see that five years ago."

The purpose of planning is to design an institution's future. But planning has many side benefits. In particular, it instills new energy in the board. Continuous planning efforts help to overcome the complacency that can infect a college after a successful turnaround and to reestablish the energy level trustees felt when they worked to bring their dying college to life. "We are certain our second plan has the same potential for excitement as the first plan," one trustee said.

The predecessor boards at these colleges did not plan. "We were engaged almost entirely in day-to-day problems of survival . . . in triage," a trustee remembered. "Money problems seemed to absorb us totally. We were trying to get through the present moment—we weren't sure we had a future beyond that."

• *Making policy.* In addition to ensuring that the college has a good president, sufficient finances, and a solid future, boards of trustees undertake to ensure that the institution's management is consistent with its mission and plan. It does this, in part, by making policy.

When the board makes policy, its decisions come up against the president's administrative decisions. As these jurisdictions touch, it becomes apparent whether there is, in fact, a governing partnership between the president and the trustees, and whether it is effective.

The boards during the days of decline did not concern themselves with distinctions between policy and administration. "Board time went to detailed negotiations over things like acquiring a piece of property and bidding on furnace repairs," one trustee recalled.

Two of the new presidents insisted at the outset on such distinctions. Explained one, "When I came, I told the trustees, 'One of the greatest dangers is you're going to want to continue to administer the college. If you do, then don't have a president.'" Recalled the other, "I laid out the ground rules to the board: You have to know what your role is."

The current boards agree on the importance of distinguishing policy from administrative decisions. One trustee who had worked from 6 p.m. to 1:30 a.m. running the college during "the struggle time," when there was no president, said, "I knew after the president came that our job was to make policy and have him run the school in the framework we set. Some trustees who couldn't let go, left." A trustee at another college said, "The board can't run an institution. Its job is oversight over how it's run and how it's progressing toward its goals."

One trustee summed up the board's job: "A board has to decide policy; this board *does* decide policy."

Trustees offered many examples of policy decisions. For instance:

> *We had an unanticipated deficit because we had some surprises about bad debts—real surprises. We don't want any more surprises. So we put a $50,000 cushion under unexpected expenses. We don't want to do this as a long-term strategy, but we do until we can be sure there won't be any more such surprises.*
>
> *We are nervous that the money we get from the state will stop. So we're building reserves by moving surplus into endowment.*
>
> *We make policies through the committees. Through our finance committee, we developed an audit policy, and through our investment committee, we developed investment policy.*

Many of the trustees are rigorous in maintaining the boundaries between policy and administration. As one trustee illustrated, "I'm on the academic affairs committee, whose members, including faculty and students,

are encouraged to talk about anything. But administrative matters that are brought up are referred to the administration for administrative action, and they don't report back to us."

Sometimes the distinction is difficult to make:

> *How many students pay is an administrative issue, but it's not an administrative issue when the board has to determine a budget policy regarding payments.*
>
> *We don't make decisions about the fourth-year curriculum and visiting hours in the dormitory, but we are informed. That's necessary if we are to know the college and make policies that relate to these issues.*

The boundaries are different from college to college—and president to president. "There's a fine line between running a college on a day-to-day basis and long-term policy," explained one trustee. "The previous president's ideas of where the line was, was way over there. This president's ideas are way over here."

Said another,

> *This president is very, very sensitive when she sees the dividing line—so we have to be sensitive to that. Students complained to the [board's] Student Affairs Committee about something in the dormitory. The chair of the committee said, "We'll get the Director of Housing to deal with this." To the president this meant the trustee went to the administration without going through her. I agreed with the president, but I said it wasn't adversarial. The president saw it as a usurpation of her powers. At times the board has said, "Why don't you tell us where the boundaries are?"*

5. Board members make high-level psychological and resource commitments. Trustees with whom I spoke were emphatic that "everyone *should* make a high-level commitment; almost everyone *must.*" These boards expect that commitment from their members, and they get it.

In the past, no commitment was expected at all, or the expectation was dismissive. One trustee recalled his shock at the first board meeting, when he learned that the college would have a deficit of $100,000 to $200,000 for the year. In fact, its deficit was more than $500,000. "I had been told, 'You don't have to do much,' and yet it was clear there was much to be done."

Now, the expectation of commitment is made explicit before a trustee candidate joins the board: "We say, after your family, your church, and your business, we want to be the priority."

A few trustees "were riding in the boat but not pulling two oars—even one oar." At two of the colleges, the free riders were asked to leave. "The easy way to get people off the board is our 'two terms and then you go off' rule. We changed that. It speaks to the board's forthrightness in handling the problem this way." But most board members meet the expectation. I heard repeatedly at all of the colleges, "This is my highest voluntary priority." At all three colleges, trustees' expressed their commitment in several ways:

• *Identifying viscerally with the college.* In contrast to the situation before, when "not much of anyone cared whether the college lived or died," the trustees now care very much. Indeed, their aspiration is not survival but preeminence.

One trustee is a third-generation trustee, with fifth-generation connections to the college. Her son-in-law also serves on the board. Not everyone had this ancestral history, but they do feel connected and proud.

Without that connection, trustee performance fails. "One trustee doesn't have it; for example, he and his wife usually don't come to the small dinners. When we ask him to cultivate someone for the board, his response is 'I'm not the right one, I'm too close to that person.' If he really felt good about the college, he would feel he was helping a friend, not doing us a favor."

• *Making personal financial contributions.* The boards approach giving differently. One college specifies that trustees are to give a minimum of $5,000 annually. When the $5,000 minimum was initially set, some trustees were shocked and didn't stand for reelection. But board donations went from $48,000 in 1990 to $400,000 in 1993—in addition to $3 million in pledges toward a $10 million campaign. "We make no apology anymore about telling trustees they have to support the college," said one trustee.

Another college specifies no minimum, but all trustees give at least $1,000. At the third, for the first time, there is a goal for each board member, established by an ad hoc committee in consultation with each trustee. This year, trustees' gifts range from $1,000 to $50,000, whereas in the past, some trustees gave as little as $100, and perhaps 30 percent of them didn't give at all. The fund-raising chair also set a goal at 100 percent participation—a goal that is now being met.

Even though this is the first time specific amounts are being identified for trustees, and the contact process is careful and slow, "trustees now have a higher-level commitment. Before, most board members thought they were very generous giving $2,000. Most people reacted positively to the suggested amount, and most people stretched."

With success in raising the commitment comes higher aspirations.

Colleges that asked for $5,000 would now like to ask for $10,000. At a college where a trustee has pledged $100,000, they expect in the future a pledge of $1 million: "We want more silk trustees instead of polyester."

• *Using personal and professional networks to raise funds from others.* Trustees are expected not only to give but also to get. This is a new obligation for trustees at all three colleges. "This board had never done any fund-raising—trustees didn't ask anyone to give," said one.

Many trustees are now active fund-raisers. At one college, at least two-thirds of the trustees are actively raising funds across the country. A stockbroker travels a 200-mile radius making calls on behalf of the college; a local trustee whose business takes her outside the area calls on prospects when she travels; a local doctor and a local lawyer send personal letters to professional colleagues. Trustees link the college to foundations, corporate contributors, large-scale private donors, and professional and business associates. "Our trustees are not the people who have the most money in our community, but they have connections to those who do, and we expect them to use those connections," said one trustee.

Other trustees are not as active, but they nevertheless accept the need for raising funds. "I knew there would be a struggle to fund the college, but I knew fund-raising had to be done," said one.

Acceptance of the need doesn't make asking necessarily easy, as one trustee, who is also on the board of a local bank, described:

> *I had to stand up at the bank board meeting with other college trustees who are on the board and then go to other banks to put together a consortium that would extend a loan to the college. It's the hardest thing I ever did in my life.*

As the colleges moved dramatically from failure to success, however, asking became easier, because "we really have something to offer now." Asking also became easier with fund-raising success: "We've raised more money by far than at any time in this college's history. Every year we have some kind of money drive and every year we meet our goal."

And with success came higher aspirations:

> *We raised $1.5 million at home when it was impossible. It turned us around to an awareness that we can do whatever we have to do.*
>
> *Now we have a $10 million campaign, the largest campaign this college has* ever *had. We know the goal is reachable—it's not a wild dream.*

• *Using personal and professional networks to connect the college to appropriate communities.* Presidents and trustees agreed that they do not want trustees who only provide money. One explained, "If all they see is a financial commitment, they lose their sense of involvement." Added another, "One of our trustees is wealthy and generous, but doesn't attend meetings—that's not the kind of trustee we want."

In addition to providing money, trustees use their connections to link their college to its constituencies. They speak to their friends, neighbors, and associates; take them to campus; and bring the campus to them. In turn, "We've gotten people involved who weren't involved before."

As trustees' pride in the college grew, it became easier to "talk about the college all the time" and to make community connections in a multitude of small and large ways. Said one trustee, "People in the community are swept up by the success of the college, by the sophistication and importance of what is going on here."

The job can take time, however. As one trustee explained,

> *There was a time when the community didn't know about this college. It would have fallen down and they wouldn't know. The community still hasn't reclaimed or embraced this college. That's our mission to get them to do that.*

• *Investing their time.* All the fully participating trustees invest time. This is not the frantic, almost daily commitment required when the institution was in crisis and trustees were running the college. But it does take time "to perform appropriate functions appropriately."

To begin with, trustees are expected to attend board and committee meetings and "to do our homework" before those meetings. Trustees who live far from the campuses may rely heavily on conference calls and faxes to do their committee work, but they purportedly never miss a meeting. Said a trustee from one college, "There are 45 members at every board meeting, and we come from all over the country."

Most trustees give much more time than the minimum needed for meetings. Some put a high priority on campus visibility. Said one, "If I'm going to be on this board, then I'm going to be actively involved. People are going to be able to *see* me working for and supporting the college." Many trustees live in the community and are on campus every month for ceremonies, concerts, and social events. One trustee who ran a business, attended law school, and parented eight children and 23 foster children (though not all at once) still managed to come to campus every few weeks for a college function.

The number of hours and days invested varies. "We're in the middle of a capital campaign. I can't see anyone giving less than 30 days a year," said one trustee. Said another, "If the college needs me, I'll give whatever time it takes."

• *Making special contributions that reflect institutional needs.* "Each trustee has a unique gift and contributes that unequivocally," a trustee said. At each college, people described trustees who offered direct and valuable services based on their special experience, talents, or interests. One trustee in the construction industry brought in crews to transform a parking lot into a lawn and garden. At another college, an expert in historic preservation oversaw the renovation of old buildings on campus. At the third college, a trustee worked closely with college maintenance staff on demolition projects.

Other special contributions included recruiting students (and often supporting them financially through college); recruiting faculty; serving in a formal mentor program; and teaching courses. One trustee, then the chief operating officer of a major corporation, appeared as a guest lecturer, offering a business perspective in poetry, philosophy, and literature classes as well as business classes. "I let the faculty know I would come if they called on me, and they did. The professor of literature sent me the book assigned to the students and warned, 'Don't come to class unless you've read it.' I read it."

6. Board members maintain multiple, constructive relationships. Any board involves intricate, multiple relationships: between the board chair and the president; between the trustees and the president, faculty, students, and local community members; and among the trustees. In a successful board, the relationships are mutually respectful and productive.

• *Relationship between board chair and the president.* A good relationship between the chair and president is absolutely crucial, trustees at all three colleges agreed, but the nature of that relationship can vary. At one college, the chair and president closely identified with each other. "We were born the same year, we share the same values—we care about each other and each other's families." One chair provided almost brotherly support when the president was troubled by board actions. Another, according to the president, served as a mentor:

> *He helped me move from being president to being a leader. He taught me to keep my focus simple and understandable, to apportion my time according to my priorities. He's a teacher and I was—I am—a good student.*

Chairs said their working relationship with the president involved "challenging conventional wisdom," "serving as a sounding board," "supporting the president and making it easier for her," "helping develop consensus on the board for important presidential initiatives," and "helping to clarify" presidential policy positions.

In each case, the president and board chair communicate frequently, with contacts ranging from once or twice a week, to a few visits a month with telephone contacts in between, to regular "sit down" conversations and frequent lunches. All chairs asserted that their communication has to be open and honest, with "no secrets," and "the bad news as well as the good news."

"The chair should be supportive of the president and sensitive to his interests and suggestions," one chair summarized, "but there are times when the chair has to take stands contrary to what the president might want."

• *Relationship between the trustees and the president.* "Some of the trustees thought, 'If you're one of those presidents who really runs the school, then you don't need the board.' That's not true. I need the board," one president asserted. That president and the others I interviewed need their boards to do what boards are supposed to do—and they need their boards to support them. At these colleges, the presidents get that support. "We should reinforce the president," the trustees generally agreed, "and make it easier for her."

The support, however, is not blind: "We're comfortable pointing out shortcomings, and we do." The annual review process enables trustees to identify shortcomings, and they deal with any problems candidly and respectfully. "There are times when it's risky to go against the president's wishes, but it has to be done for the betterment of the college," said a trustee.

Trustees repeatedly said they are not willing to be a presidential "rubber stamp." They modify presidential proposals, and the president welcomes their input. "I want them to hash out issues," one president stated. "Many times they come up with better ideas."

At times, the trustees lead the way. "When I came on," a trustee said, "my general goal was to support the president in advancing the mission. Then the accreditation review team pointed out we lacked certain facilities, and I made it my project to get a new library." At the same college, the board made retention a priority: "The president brought the issue to the table every year, but he wasn't prepared to give it prominence. The board was." Another board took the initiative on investment management: "The president can't have expertise in everything. He didn't have experience here, and we did."

Board-president relationships at these colleges are marked by candor, respect, and trust. Trustees expressed awareness of the president's respect for them—and also showed respect for their presidents. "He has to know that he has the complete trust of the board," one trustee stated. Such a relationship can develop only slowly, through regular and frequent trustee-president interactions.

• *Relationships among the trustees.* Trustees remembered board meetings before the transformation as "a waste of time"—or worse. "I remember the horror of our meetings ten years ago." "Meetings were an endurance contest. You were so glad to get out, you didn't ask many questions." "The air was always heavy, filled with mistrust." "If there were any way to exit gracefully, the trustees would have; it was very painful to come to board meetings." "There were times before I'd go down to the college, I was so depressed, I'd have a headache for days."

The meetings now are different in every way. Said one trustee, "We're having such a good time, we line up to get in. We look forward to our next meeting. I see the new trustees and how they leave each meeting walking on air."

The boards deal with matters of importance through full and free discussions without polarization: "Our discussions never get super-heated," said one trustee. "There are no personal interests, no personal agendas—everyone is thinking of the best interests of the college. We appreciate the differences." Or, as another trustee described: "People are free to air their opinions, and they do."

Questions are encouraged and answered. A chair commented, "If a board member asks a question, it's not stupid." At that college, if a trustee asks for a special session to deal with an issue, "We'll have it. There's no issue that we shouldn't deal with. A problem that is dismissed is a problem that will fester and linger."

The trustees function as a group marked by mutual respect, humor and camaraderie: "Trustees here really enjoy being with each other." "This board is fantastic!"

At its best, the team spirit goes beyond the meetings. As one trustee noted,

> *This board is large and diverse, but all the people come together as individuals and merge. It's like a marriage relationship. When it comes to the college, we're all together. We don't have cliques. At our dinners, people don't sit with the same people from dinner to dinner.*

• *Relationships between the trustees and the college's constituents.* Trustees not only interact with the president and with one another but also with the internal and external college communities. These relationships, like the others, are strikingly different than they were before revitalization.

Trustees at two of the colleges cited a striking change in board-faculty relationships. "In the past," said one trustee, "the link between faculty and trustees wasn't there." Trustees considered the faculty "arrogant," "troublemakers," "lazy," and "deadwood." A trustee once went to a faculty meeting wearing a football helmet and carrying a baseball bat, to bring the faculty in line.

At both those colleges, the link is there now. The trustees expressed awareness of the "intense preparation necessary" for the faculty to teach the new curriculum and appreciation for the comprehensive curriculum changes: "The same 'troublemakers' are the ones who have done all this good work."

The respect is reciprocal. Before, the faculty sought representation on the board at one college. "Now the faculty trusts the trustees," a faculty leader reported. "We don't need to be there; we don't feel cut off. I could call the chair if we had a problem." At that college, all board meetings are announced and open. Said one trustee, "They really respect the board and thank us for the way we gave them back the college."

Again, mutual respect grew from frequent contact. Faculty worked with trustees in the planning effort and on other committees. At one college, faculty are invited to the dinners before each board meeting. "There's real conversation about what's going on," said a faculty member. "The trustees' questions show they are informed and interested." At another college, the local trustees frequently eat in the cafeteria with faculty. Where before trustees wanted to "keep the faculty at a distance," now they make an effort to establish meaningful contact. The chair of one board's academic affairs committee said, "I feel I should know all the faculty."

Relationships with administrators, staff, and students also developed through opportunities for interaction—both around substantive concerns and through social exchanges. Each college's community knows of the trustees and their participation in the college's governance. The president of one college convenes the entire college community after each board meeting, reports on the meeting, and solicits comments and questions to take back to the board.

At another, the students come to board meetings to "brief" the trustees. Said one trustee, "At their age, I would have been intimidated, speaking before about 50 people. They are so impressive, articulate—I feel parental pride." Trustees mentor students and hear their stories at awards ceremonies; at one college, all of them seemed to know about a student who walked 16 miles a day to campus because he couldn't afford public transportation.

With knowledge comes respect. "Before, I didn't know people at this college," one trustee recalled, "and I didn't respect people at this college. That's different now."

At all the colleges there are efforts to energize alumni interest after years of neglect and abuse, to develop a sense of college ownership within the community, and to strengthen ties that have been loosened—and almost severed—with the relevant church bodies.

7. Board members stay informed. Trustees indicated an interest in knowing about many areas: current and projected changes within higher education; their college's tradition; and activities and concerns on their own campuses. "The experience in turning around this institution has taught me a lesson—to be more aware," one trustee advised.

Particularly impressive is trustees' awareness of their college's mission. Trustees on each campus told me, "Everyone on the board is pretty clear about what our mission is and has a lot of heart for it." At one college, where the mission was initially formulated by the president, members of the board agreed that "trustees have to be connected to the mission, because the mission is absolutely fundamental to what we do."

In the years before the turnaround, trustees acquired whatever understanding they had about higher education and campus life almost exclusively from the president. Unfortunately, the presidents were neither adequately informative nor forthright. I heard many war stories:

> *The president set out to spread misinformation. For example, he had charts drawn to justify our low enrollment expectations. He used facts not to clarify, but to befuddle. If you complained, he'd tire you out with more misinformation. The president hoodwinked the board.*
>
> *A private consulting firm was called in and came up with some recommendations. The president dismissed the report. "You wouldn't believe all the [nonsense] we got; we got the most ridiculous recommendations." It turned out those recommendations were just what needed to be done—they hit the nail on the head.*
>
> *I had been spoon-fed. I wasn't aware, and I felt so foolish when I learned the truth.*

Complaints occasionally came to them from faculty and students—sometimes in the compelling form of a lawsuit. But based on the information they had from the president, they tended to dismiss these complaints as the unfounded grumblings of chronic malcontents.

By contrast, the current presidents are diligent communicators. Some presidents send out substantial information packages before each board meeting. "The president wants us to participate," one trustee commented. "There are good briefings at the meetings and good information at the committees."

In between meetings, trustees receive a "thorough but manageable" flow of information. One president sends a mailing about once a month with routine updates, reprints from newspapers and magazines about education, and articles from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. This president persists in, as he said, "enriching the trustees' understanding about what we're about educationally. Most board members would not put this on top of their list, but it's on top of mine. The more they see themselves as educators and understand what the college is trying to do, the more they can contribute."

One trustee seconded that idea: "All of us are concerned about the state of education in this republic. Therefore, we welcome chances to engage in conversations about education."

Still, the trustees don't rely solely on the president, or the issues on the board agenda, for their information. They also learn through active engagement in the life of the college. As one president expressed it,

> *Trustees have to be intellectually and emotionally touched and transformed by what we're doing. They can be only if they come close—close enough to feel it, be edified by it. This means coming to events; meeting students, faculty, administrators, alumni; talking in the community where they have to field questions. They have to wrap their arms around the college.*

One way trustees can "wrap their arms around the college" is by participating in collegewide focused dialogues. One college sponsored a series of three-hour, open-invitation, informal conversations twice a month to discuss the significance and consequences of the mission. About 20 or 30 people dropped in over the course of these conversations; trustees were among the drop-ins. At another college, a forum following the Rodney King jury verdict included board members on the panel and in the participating audience.

The trustees also make a point of listening to faculty and students. A trustee at a college that revised its curriculum explained, "At every board meeting, there was a half-day presentation and discussion about the new curriculum. Students also made presentations." After the adoption of the curriculum, said a faculty member, "the board set aside half a day for us to make presentations about the competency process. There was a high level of interest by board members. They asked good questions that indicated they had paid attention and had done reading on their own."

At another college, faculty and student representatives come to board meetings. "They report their dissatisfactions or things they want changed, as well as their satisfactions. Things are out in the open."

Many trustees, out of heightened interest developed through their board service and out of fear of the dangers of insularity, educate themselves by reading *Trusteeship*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* and books and articles about higher education. Some attend outside workshops and share the information with their colleagues on the board.

Trustees frequently noted that they get the information they need by asking questions. At one college, where the trustees identified a keen interest in retention, they ask questions about the background of students, how they are recruited, and what the college is doing with the information it has about students.

At these colleges, trustees' questions are answered. "The president doesn't leave anything unresponded to," said one trustee. "Within a month or less we'll have some kind of response, and at the next meeting we'll have a report on the matter questioned."

Trustees do need a certain threshold of knowledge in order to know what questions to ask. Otherwise, a board chair warned, they might end up "getting involved with day-to-day administration. For example, we go into the student-affairs office and ask, 'Why do you have this single-sex dorm?' instead of asking, 'What are the trends and changes in student life?'"

A Prescription for Board Effectiveness. Boards of trustees, by their action and inaction, contribute to an institution's decline. In order for that institution to revive, the board must transform itself as well.

But the first and most essential step is to acknowledge that the board needs reform. In the words of one trustee, "It's hard to solve a problem if you don't know you have one." Said another, "There was a trustee problem here before the board admitted there was a trustee problem."

Like the patient who must admit to being ill before beginning on the road to recovery, a board cannot improve itself until it defines and articulates its own weaknesses. Fortunately, identifying shortcomings often makes them manageable. As one trustee said, "Once we realized we had all these problems on the board, then we could solve them."

And just as a sick patient may need professional treatment, boards should not hesitate to seek help. All three of the boards described here were helped by the president and their own trustees. Internal help is not always enough; while presidents and trustees can draw on their experiences, they are not systematically trained in board development. Fortunately, good outside help is available from AGB and others.

Revitalization—of a board or of a college—is hardly easy. As one trustee said, "None of us knew what we were getting into when we commit-

ted ourselves to revival, and it may have been a mite scary for some." But all of those interviewed agreed that a board can be changed into an effective partner and that working to bring about that change is worth the effort.

Every board already has unused but readily available resources in its own trustees. Most trustees are ready and willing to contribute toward board transformation; trustees want to be effective. "We had more talent than we ever dreamed of," one trustee noted. "We tapped this talent out of necessity."

That talent will increase as the board selects new members. Trustees at all of the colleges emphasized, "It's not hard to get good people."

The boards I examined also found that once a revitalization effort begins, it gains momentum with each step. Over and over, trustees noted that "success breeds success." Each task—adding board members, raising funds, increasing contacts—is made easier with each accomplishment. "Before, the town wouldn't know if the college died; now, there are 3,000 people on campus for a Saturday game," said one trustee. "It has become prestigious to become a member of this board," said another. And, "Everyone wants to be a part of this college because we're successful."

Reaping the rewards. Some trustees noted that serving on an effective board benefits them personally: "What I learn on this board, I can use. For example, I can use what I've learned about planning where I work." Others spoke of paying back a debt: "What I am today, I owe to this college. I feel a responsibility to make what I had available to others." Many were proud simply to be part of the college's accomplishments, saying such things as "I've gotten more than I could possibly give" and "To be a trustee is ennobling and humbling at the same time."

But clearly, these trustees found the most significant benefits to be those that the college itself enjoyed. Trustees were proud that their college "has given this city a larger value system," "is a major community resource," "the town's finest asset." Said one:

> *This college brings stability to the community through the value of the education it provides. It brings to our community a cadre of educated people who are role models in town; it brings cultural experiences that wouldn't otherwise be available. This college brings so many intangible benefits.*

Others spoke of helping students learn and become productive citizens: "There are 800 students here who wouldn't otherwise have gone to college." "Our students come from families where no one has ever written a check. They are going to be productive citizens." "There is an excitement about what we're doing here; when you meet with our students you can't help feeling you're doing something important."

The trustees were most eloquent and most passionate when they expressed purposes that had a larger reach and were more idealistic. "We have a sense that we have gotten hold of something that speaks to the real problems of our society."

The transition to effectiveness can be difficult, but it is, clearly, exhilaratingly satisfying. One trustee, in expressing his satisfaction, represented the views of the many with whom I spoke: "These past six years have been consistently the most gratifying experience I've had."

(Note: This paper does not discuss the important institutional changes led by the college's president. For an account of the president's leadership, see "Prescription for Small-College Turnaround" in Change, *January/February 1993, pp. 31-39.)*

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